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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 5469
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3193
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3058
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 3713
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000928

SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: GENGESH ELECTION DAY VISIT TO
POLLING STATIONS

REF: ASHGABAT 926

¶1. Sensitive but unclassified. Please handle accordingly.
Not for Internet distribution.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY. Gengesh (local council) elections in Turkmenistan's villages and rural areas took place on July 26. A visit to three polling stations in villages outside of Ashgabat indicated that, while voting was well organized and orderly, there did not appear to be the level of voter interest that would produce the announced 95.7 percent turnout. Two of the villages, the birthplaces of Turkmenistan's two independence era presidents, boasted some impressive public works projects. Perhaps the significance for voters of this grassroots level of government will rise if and when the councils are given a more meaningful role in local governance. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (SBU) During the July 26 gengesh (local council) elections, poloff, accompanied by officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Central Election Commission, visited three polling stations in rural Ruhabat District adjacent to Ashgabat. The first polling station was in President Berdimuhamedov's home village, Babarap, located 18 miles from Ashgabat, just off the main highway leading to Turkmenbashi. Upon leaving the highway, the road passes under a newly-constructed, massive entry arch, ornamented with statues of important figures from Turkmen history and dwarfing nearby homes. The polling station was located in the foyer of the village high school, which opened in January. According to the polling station's chairperson, the multi-story white marble building is fully equipped for students, including computers and sports facilities. Upon arrival, poloff and his government escorts were greeted by three young women presenting trays of cookies and sweets in a traditional welcome ceremony. One of the half dozen elders seated near the entrance offered prayers. Music was playing loudly in the courtyard in front of the school and a display of snacks and drinks was offered for sale.

¶4. (SBU) Within the Babarap polling station itself, there were no voters during poloff's visit, which took place around ten o'clock in the morning. The polls opened at seven

o'clock and would close at seven that evening. A running count of the number of voters would be calculated every two hours during the day. As of nine o'clock, 30 percent of the 1,961 voters had cast their votes. It was explained that early turnout was heavy as people showed up early to vote before heading off to work in their fields. During poloff's 20 minute visit, only one voter showed up. The first voter of the day had received a small prize, and all first time voters and elderly voters received gifts. There were three election observers seated at a table watching the proceedings. They were representatives of the Democratic Party and social organizations such as the Youth Union and Labor Union. They operated on a roving basis, visiting numerous polling stations during the day. They signed in upon arrival on a form that included space to make remarks and note violations, but that part of the form was blank.

15. (SBU) The Babarap polling station handled the voting for five electoral districts. In each electoral district, for which the number of voters did not exceed 400, there were two candidates. The Babarap gengesh would have a total of eleven council members, five of whom would be elected at this polling station, and six more elected at a nearby polling station. A candidate must be a resident of the electoral district where he or she is running, and each voter votes only for one of the candidates from his or her district.

16. (SBU) The next polling station visited was located in a Soviet-era medical clinic located adjacent to the highway in Herrakala village. Three electoral districts were covered by this polling station. Of the 1,926 registered voters, 30

ASHGABAT 00000928 002 OF 002

percent had voted by nine o'clock. There was one voter who cast his ballot while poloff was at the polling station. No election observers were present. Poloff was told that posters describing the candidates with biographical information, photos and a statement of their platforms had been removed prior to election day as these were considered campaign material. Officials pointed out that, in any case, the voters would personally know the candidates, given the small size of the electoral districts. As at the previous polling station, snacks were displayed for sale and music blared, but few people were hanging around.

17. (SBU) The third polling station visited was in Kipchak, the birthplace of former President Niyazov. This polling station was also located in a new white marble high school that opened in March. It was one of three polling stations in the village, which combined would elect ten gengesh members. This polling station covered four electoral districts with a total of eight candidates, two of whom were incumbents. Of the 1,785 registered voters, 36 percent had voted by nine o'clock. One election observer from the youth union was present, although five others had visited the polling station earlier in the day. No violations had been observed. Two nurses were also in attendance in case someone would need their services. Several people voted during poloff's visit. The high school was part of a recently completed complex of white marble buildings that included a bazaar, hotel, service center, and government offices.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: On the day after the elections, state media reported that voter turnout was 95.7%. However, during poloff's visits, there was nothing that indicated such a high level of voter interest. According to government officials, the role of the gengesh is still under review and there is a desire to expand its authority (reftel). Given the gengesh's grassroots nature, if this body was given some real power to impact peoples' lives, gengesh elections could become more than their current focus on form over substance. END COMMENT.
CURRAN